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ABSTRACT

The linguistic and cultural diversity of America's school population has increased dramatically during the past decade, and is expected to increase even more in the future. But, for many children of immigrant and minority families, U.S. education is not a successful experience. One fourth of African Americans, one third of Hispanics, one half of Native Americans, and two thirds of immigrant students drop out of school, compared to one tenth of non-Hispanic White students. Confronted with this dismal reality, educators, parents, and policy makers urge change. Changes might be needed but will be meaningless unless we begin to think differently about these students--to view them in new ways that may contradict conventional notions and to recognize their needs. This is particularly the case for educators and communities along "la frontera," an extensive geographic region along the Mexican-U.S. border that is a significant social and economic zone distinct from either nation. It would be helpful for educators to realize that: (1) low, not high, levels of immigration are unusual for the United States, and today's kindergartners will experience increasing diversity over their lifetimes; (2) "la frontera" has always been multicultural and multilingual; (3) changing labor markets and the globalization of the economy indicate that past ways of preparing students for employment may not work now; (4) defining students of "la frontera" as limited-English-speaking masks their diversity of language, culture, and educational experience; (5) assimilation doesn't equal success along "la frontera"; and (6) these children will change American society. (SV)

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Foreword

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As teachers look at the students in their classrooms today, they see a scenario much different from the classrooms of their own childhoods. Today 1 in 3 children nationwide is from an ethnic or racial minority group, 1 in 7 speaks a language other than English at home, and 1 in 15 was born outside the United States. The linguistic and cultural diversity of America's school population has increased dramatically during the past decade, and it's expected to increase even more in the future. While three quarters of Americans now claim European descent, by 2050 only half will. The concept of "minority" group will become obsolete as no group will form a majority.

Educating children from immigrant and ethnic minority group families is a major concern of school systems across the country. For many of these children, U.S. education is not a successful experience. While one tenth of non-Hispanic White students leave school without a diploma, one fourth of African Americans, one third of Hispanics, one half of Native Americans, and two thirds of immigrant students drop out of school.

Confronted with this dismal reality, administrators, teachers, parents, and policy makers urge each other to do something different—change teaching methods, adopt new curricula, allocate more funding. Such actions might be needed, but will be meaningless unless we begin to think differently about these students. In order to educate them, we must first educate ourselves about who they are and what they need in order to succeed. Thinking differently involves viewing these students in new ways that may contradict conventional notions, and coming to a new set of realizations.

This is particularly the case for educators and communities along "*la frontera*," an extensive geographical region bordering the United States and Mexico that is, intellectually and empirically, a significant social and economic zone quite distinct from either nation. This volume does much to explore this geographical, social, economic, and intellectual zone. My opening remarks to this significant volume will attempt to set a broader *context* for the *text* delivered in the contributions that follow.

These Are Not The Students We Expected To Be Teaching

In contrast to racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity among students, the vast majority of teachers and administrators are Euro-American and speak English as their native and only language. Many are experiencing the daunting personal and professional challenge of adapting in adulthood to a degree of diversity that did not exist in their childhood. No place is the challenge greater than along *la frontera.*

The average teacher and administrator in his/her 30s or 40s grew up in the 1950s or 1960s. People who were raised in the postwar period, before desegregation, were likely to have attended schools with those of their own ethnic group. Not until young adulthood did they encounter the civil rights movement and other expressions of ethnic presence at the national level. Nor did they experience the swift increases in diversity that have occurred recently. They and their parents grew up expecting a much different world from what they now face.

The parents and teachers of today's teacher, now retired, grew up in the 1930s and the 1940s, after the period of massive immigration from Europe to the United States had ended. Today's retiree entered school at a time when the United States had a much larger proportion of foreign-born persons than today. But this diversity was perhaps not so evident because of segregated ethnic enclaves in housing and schooling and less widespread mass communications. And over the course of their lifetime, people now in their 70s experienced decreasing diversity. The melting pot ideology matched their own observations; the children of immigrants abandoned their native language and culture as they were urged to become 100 percent American. That just doesn't happen along *la frontera.*

But the 30-year period straddling the mid-century mark was an anomaly in our history. Until the 1930s, the story of the United States was a tale of immigration. The grandparents of today's teacher, who grew up in the early 1900s, and many of whom were immigrants themselves, experienced increasing ethnic and linguistic diversity during their formative years.

It Is Low, Not High, Levels of Immigration That Are Unusual

To many Americans, the immigration movement that brought our ancestors to this country is a closed chapter, part of our national past. But from the perspective of the entire spectrum of American history, immigration has been the norm rather than the exception. Two generations of adults have grown up in a very unusual low immigration period, an environment that has shaped our perceptions of our country. The new reality is that the America of 2000 will resemble the America of 1900 more than the America of 1950. Today's kindergartners will experience increasing diversity over their lifetime, as the generation of their great-grandparents did.

From 1900 to 1910, nearly 9 million immigrants entered the United States, increasing the total population by 10 percent. In the 1980s, about the same number of immigrants came to the United States, but they accounted for only a 4 percent increase in a now much larger U.S. population. In the early decades of the century, and back as far as 1850, as many as 1 in 7 persons in the United States were foreign born. The current rate of 1 in 13 is high only in comparison to the low immigration decades of the 1950s and 60s, when 1 in 20 Americans were foreign born. By 2020, when today's kindergartners are in the work force, the foreign-born population in the United States is again projected to reach 1 in 7 persons.

La Frontera Has Always Been Multicultural & Multilingual

Because the United States is so closely identified with the English language, many people assume that Anglo-Americans have always formed the majority group in U.S. society. But the 1990 Census reveals that only 13 percent of Americans claim English ancestry. They are outnumbered by the 15 percent whose families originated in Ireland, many of whom did not speak English as a native language. An additional 5 percent identify their ancestry as "Americans"; many of these are Scottish-Americans whose families have been in the United States for 9 or 10 generations. Thus, at most, about one third of Americans trace their ancestry to various cultures and languages of Great Britain.

German tops English as the heritage of the largest number of Americans; nearly one fourth claim German ancestry. The prominence of German immigrants a century ago is similar to that of Hispanics today; nearly 30 percent of foreign-born immigrants in 1900 came from Germanic-language countries, and the same percentage in 1980 came from Spanish-language countries.

Today, nearly 1 in 5 Americans live in households in which a language other than English is spoken. Along *la frontera,* it is 3 in 5. Three fourths of those households are Spanish-speaking.

Educating students from immigrant families may seem like an entirely new challenge, but it is not; such students have always been in American schools in large numbers. Throughout most of our history, 1 out of 4 or 5 White Americans grew up in immigrant families.

Although the United States has never been a monolingual, monocultural society, its people have been overwhelmingly of European origin. Until 1965, immigration laws favored Europeans, and immigrants spoke languages and brought cultures with which Americans, and U.S. school systems, had some familiarity. But today less than a quarter of immigrants come from Europe; most come from Latin America and Asia. In addition to

large numbers of Spanish speakers, schools encounter students whose native language is Korean, Tagalog, Hindi, Farsi, Hmong, or Mandarin.

What Worked in the Past May Not Work Now

One mission of educators is to prepare young people for an occupational life. The economic environment in which today's students will seek employment has changed radically in the past few decades. Manufacturing jobs used to provide a good living for ethnic minority group members and for immigrants. Most jobs in the industrial sector did not require a high level of education or academic competence in English.

But those jobs have disappeared. The new economy will require workers who have more than basic skills; employees must be able to think critically and engage in group decision making, to communicate effectively orally and in writing, and to adapt to changing conditions by learning new skills. A larger proportion of jobs in the future will require the kind of educational preparation that has traditionally been provided to only the top students.

The American economy is now intertwined with the global marketplace; workers who can interact easily with people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds will be prized. Even the domestic workplace that today's students will enter is changing, as employees and customers are becoming more diverse. Business leaders are well aware that most of their new employees will be minorities and women. Observers of American business trends comment that many companies have gone beyond debating whether they need to change; they are now actively managing diversity. If one of the purposes of education is to train young people for productive work lives, then schools will need to prepare all students for employment in a more ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse occupational environment than in the past. Along *la frontera*, NAFTA propels this understanding.

One Size Doesn't Fit All Students

Students from *la frontera* families are often defined by the characteristics they share—a lack of English fluency. But such a definition masks their diversity and underestimates the challenge facing schools. Schools serve students who are new immigrants, ignorant of American life beyond what they have seen in movies, as well as African Americans, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and European American students whose families have lived here for generations. Students representing dozens of native languages may attend a single school; in some school districts more than 125 languages are spoken by students. In many

schools, a majority of the students come from immigrant or ethnic minority families. Some schools face a mobility problem; student turnover is high and the ethnic mix can shift radically from year to year.

Along with linguistic diversity comes diversity in culture, religion, and academic preparation. Some students visit their home country frequently, while others lack that opportunity. Some students have had excellent schooling in their home country before coming to the United States, others have had their schooling interrupted by war, and still others have never attended school. Some are illiterate in their own language, some have languages that were only oral until recently, and others come from cultures with long literary traditions.

Assimilation Doesn't Equal Success Along *La Frontera*

How can schools cope with the diversity presented by their students? Should they hearken back to the model of education developed in the early decades of this century to deal with the large influx of immigrant youngsters? At that time, educators responded to increasing cultural and linguistic diversity among their students by attempting to accelerate the assimilation into the American mainstream. Their mission was to Americanize immigrants by replacing their native language and culture with those of the United States. Educators confidently sought to fit newcomers into the American mold by teaching them the English language and literature, a sugar-coated version of American history, and a respect for the U.S.'s political system and civic life.

Although some recommend a similar approach today, it is no longer possible even to describe with confidence American culture, or to what mold educators should seek to fit all children. There is no single definition of American culture; multiple definitions have been informed by ethnic minority voices. This is particularly true along *la frontera.*

When immigrant students became shining academic stars, their success is often attributed to the values and habits of their native culture rather than their Americanization. There is some evidence that assimilation may actually inhibit academic success. Studies of Mexican immigrants, Indian immigrants, and children who escaped from Vietnam by boat all suggest that those who maintain a strong identification with their native language and culture are more likely to succeed in schools than those who readily adopt American ways.

These Students Will Change American Society

American society is not the same as it was a century ago, or even a decade ago, partly because of the different peoples who have come to our

shores. Without their contributions we would not have such American icons as the Christmas tree, the log cabin, labor unions, and jazz. Jewish immigrants in the early part of this century demanded entry to college in such numbers that they transformed what had been a finishing school for the wealthy to an opportunity for individual advancement.

Those students were fortunate to have educators dedicated to their success, even if the teachers never anticipated that their efforts would have the far-reaching effect of helping to democratize higher education. Educators of that era were selected not only for their formal credentials, but for their suitability as role models for the young. The impact of an educator on the life of young people can hardly be overestimated. Education represents a link to the adult world of successful educated professionals. For children of a different culture and language especially, education has a tremendous impact; schools are their critical links to society. Without the caring guidance of educators, these youth of today will have great difficulty getting into college and becoming engineers, playwrights, or educators themselves and serving as positive contributors to our social and economic well-being.

This volume touches the many aspects of how education is meeting this challenge in *la frontera*. There are no easy answers, but this volume provides the analysis needed, a forum for dialogue that must continue and for the hope that is felt along *la frontera*.

Notes:

Population information is from United States Census Bureau reports.

For information on early twentieth century immigrants and education, see *Going to America, going to school: The Jewish immigrant public school encounter in turn-of-the-century New York City* by Stephan F. Brumberg (1986), New York: Praeger.

For further information on diversity and academic achievement, see *Understanding and meeting the challenge of student cultural diversity* by Eugene E. Garcia (1994), Boston: Houghton Mifflin; and *Handbook of research on multicultural education*, edited by James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks (1995), New York: Macmillan Publishing.

For further information on second language learning, see *Myths and misconceptions on second language learning: What every teacher needs to unlearn* by Barry McLaughlin (1992), Santa Cruz, CA: National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning; and "How long? A synthesis of research on academic achievement in a second language" by Virginia P. Collier, *TESOL Quarterly*, September 1989 Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 509-531.